

Prayer: The Foundation of Everything

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So, let me give you a little scenario, and I want you to be thinking about how you would respond if this happens to you this afternoon.

You're watching the Super Bowl, and judging by your responses earlier, you're probably tuned into the food and the commercials. You don't care about the game, but you're watching, and your phone rings. It's Sunday afternoon. The game's on, and you see that it's your boss. Why? Why are they calling this afternoon?

You answer, and it's bad news. They say, "Don't come in tomorrow. We're sorry, but we've got to let you go."

What are you doing with the rest of your evening? There's a good chance you're updating your resume. You're getting online. You're at least doing some clicking around, some looking around, some thinking, some networking, right? You're starting some kind of conversation.

What about this? I don't know if you've looked at the forecast for the week yet, but it's going to be 84 degrees on Thursday. It's going to warm up, right? Some of you are done with the cold. You're looking forward to summer. It'll be 84, so you're going to have to go into your house and switch the thermostat from heat to cool.

What if it doesn't cool? You bring somebody out, and they look at it and say, "Hey, this can't be fixed. You need a new unit." They give you the price, and it's more money than you have. What are you going to do? You're going to do something. You're going to talk to them about financing. You're going to ask about a loan. You're going to jump into action to think about how you're going to cool your house down, because you know that 82 or 84 on Thursday is just the start in Houston.

What about this scenario? You've got some good friends in your friend group, and two of them are at odds with one another. There's a fight. There's a blowup, and they're not connecting anymore. They won't be around the other person anymore. It's fractured the group just a bit. What are you doing? Probably making some phone calls. Probably trying to be the peacemaker. Probably jumping in and trying to get them back together.

Listen, all of these actions are very reasonable. They make sense. Most of you were nodding along. Some of you were nodding off, but most of you were nodding along. Why? Because our first response when we face these moments, a lot of times, is action.

Action is good. I'm all for it. Problem-solving is a necessary skill. Creativity is a gift. Hard work - I absolutely love it. But here's the deal: the question for us this morning isn't whether we should act or not, but when we should act.

In our Bibles, we consistently see the pattern. The pattern is pray first, and then act.

If you're taking notes this morning, the title of our message is "Prayer: The Foundation of Everything." We're going to see that in Nehemiah. If you've got your Bible, open up to Nehemiah chapter 1.

I've given you the main idea: pray first. I also want to go ahead, at the beginning of our time together, and give you the action step. Normally, I save the application for the end, but if we know the application up front, it's going to help us better process what we're reading in Nehemiah chapter 1.

Here's the application: Meet the moment with intentional prayer. Whatever that moment is in your life, meet the moment with intentional prayer.

As followers of Christ, individually in the lives that God has us living and then collectively as a church family, we're going to see in our Bibles this morning that prayer is the foundation of everything we do. That means, as we meet the moments of life, we meet them with prayer.

As a church family, we're walking into a big vision about what's next for us. It's a massive vision - buildings and campuses and missions across the world. We want to meet the moment with intentional prayer.

The Context of Nehemiah

Nehemiah chapter 1. Hopefully, you've found it with me. It's in the Old Testament. It's before Psalms, so if you open in the middle of your Bible and work back toward the front a couple of books, you're going to find it.

We're going to see over the next several weeks how God was at work in the hearts and lives of His people, starting with intentional prayer. Look with me at Nehemiah 1:1. The Bible says this:

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel.

— Nehemiah 1:1

I want to pause there and make sure we have a solid contextual understanding of the book of Nehemiah.

First, you'll see in verse 1 that Nehemiah is writing. Look at it: "As I was in Susa." This is first person. These are the words of Nehemiah from the beginning to the end of the book.

The month of Chislev would have been November or December. It's wintertime there. King Artaxerxes is in power. It says this is the twentieth year of his reign. That would have been 445 BC. Anybody alive back then? It's a long time ago, right? About 2,500 or so years ago.

That's Nehemiah. He's in Susa, the king's winter residence, and that's when our story begins. Back to verse 1:

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

— Nehemiah 1:1-3

Nehemiah receives devastating news from his brother about the condition of Jerusalem and about the state of the people who were there in Jerusalem. Verse 3 leaves no doubt. There's no interpretation needed here. The condition of the people of God isn't good. They're living with two words there: great trouble and great shame.

The defenses of the city have been destroyed, and in the city's current state, the people of God would have been unable to worship God in the temple. It's a devastating reality for Nehemiah, and it brings him to his knees.

At this point, we should be putting a few context clues together. Geographically, Nehemiah isn't currently in Israel. Susa, the citadel he's in, is actually in the southwest corner of present-day Iran, about a thousand miles from the temple in Jerusalem. He's there because of the exile that we read about in verses 2 and 3.

This exile happened over a hundred years before Nehemiah entered the scene, and you know some of the stories surrounding the exile. Remember Daniel? Daniel was tossed into the lions' den because he refused to obey the king's order not to pray. Daniel was part of the original exile.

King Nebuchadnezzar came and besieged Jerusalem and the people of Judah. He took them over. Jerusalem fell, and King Nebuchadnezzar - this happened in a few different ways, but it started with Nebuchadnezzar - took the people of Israel, the citizens of Jerusalem, the royalty, the upper class, the skilled laborers, the artisans, the musicians, and the politicians. He took all of them and exiled them.

He took them back to Babylon, where they were going to begin working for him. He had certain projects going on, and they were going to be part of them. He left a remnant behind.

They were not in good shape. Again, the city was destroyed. The temple that Solomon, the son of David, built for the Lord was destroyed. The Ark of the Covenant was lost to history. As all of this happened, sacrifices stopped in the temple. Worship stopped in the temple. For those left behind, not only was there no worship, but there were no resources. There were no people. There was no defense. It was a bad, bad time.

There's an interesting note I found in my studies this week. It encouraged me, and I hope and pray it'll encourage you too. It doesn't tie directly into the main idea of what's going on here. It's more archaeological.

If you look at 2 Kings 25:22-24, you read that there's a man named Gedaliah. Those of you who are expecting kids, don't name your kids that. Gedaliah was appointed by King Nebuchadnezzar during the exile to be the governor, or the ruler, over Judah.

In 1935, as archaeologists continued their work in the Middle East, they found this seal. I want to read what it says: "Belonging to Gedaliah, who is over this house." They found that seal along with a lot of other artifacts from the same era when that exile would have happened to the people of Jerusalem.

It's just another note showing that archaeology continues to affirm the truth of the Word of God. So many

timelines, so many dates, so many kings, so many kingdoms, and so many events are completely validated through archaeology. It continues to point us to the truth of Scripture over and over again.

Again, it's not our main point for the morning, but it's encouraging when we see that stuff, and I wanted to share it.

For us, back to Nehemiah, the people of Israel were defeated in this first exile. They were shipped off to Babylon. There was great suffering, great trouble, and great shame for those who were left behind.

There are a handful of Psalms that you can read to get a grasp on the mental and emotional state - the heart state - of the people. Psalm 74 is one of the Psalms you can read. Psalm 137 is another one.

I'm going to read the beginning and the end of Psalm 137. The entire point of this is so you can begin to grasp what these people were going through as they were exiled, as they were left behind, and as they faced the great trouble and great shame that Nehemiah learns about. Psalm 137:1 says this:

*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.*

— Psalm 137:1

They're thinking, remembering, and weeping. I think the next verse talks about how they hung up their harps. The worship stopped. The music stopped because of this exile.

Verses 8 and 9 end the chapter like this:

*O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,
blessed shall he be who repays you
with what you have done to us!*

*Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!*

— Psalm 137:8-9

That's a hard verse to read. It's context that helps us get the picture that what was happening at the beginning of this exile was awful. There was destruction, death, shame, trouble, and real and raw pain for those who were left behind.

Eventually, in 538 BC - so this is still close to a hundred years before Nehemiah chapter 1 starts - the Persians came in and gave the Babylonians what was coming to them. The Persians took over. They governed and ruled differently.

They began to allow the people whom the Babylonians had conquered to return to their homelands if they wanted to. The people of Israel were allowed to go back to Jerusalem. It wasn't mandated for them, but it was allowed.

Because of that, travel between Persia and Jerusalem opened up. Travel between Susa and Jerusalem

opened up, and Nehemiah and the people of Israel who were still exiled began to learn that attempts had been undertaken to begin rebuilding the city.

Ezra, another one of these Old Testament prophet books, went back to Jerusalem before Nehemiah did, and he undertook efforts to rebuild the temple there. There's a good chance that the great trouble and shame we read about in Nehemiah chapter 1 is what we see in Ezra chapter 4, when the efforts to rebuild the temple are attacked and stopped by force.

Great trouble and great shame. That's where the people are. That's what Nehemiah hears.

Nehemiah's Response

I want you to see his response in verse 4. This is really the point of our time together this morning. I want this to sink into our hearts just like it did his.

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

— Nehemiah 1:4

Nehemiah is devastated. He's devastated.

We're about to see in his prayer that he's not devastated about walls and gates. He's not devastated about brick and mortar. He's devastated for people. He wept and mourned for days.

Have you ever been in one of those places where you wept and mourned? Not where you were sad for a day, but where something happened in your life that left you in a state of weeping and mourning?

The majority of us have been there at one point or another. More than likely, it was at a time in our lives when we lost someone we loved. We lost someone close to us, and it wrecked our hearts in a way that left us mourning and weeping. That's a natural thing, and that's going to happen. It should happen if we love people.

But here's the deal. I want you to note that Nehemiah's response to hearing about the spiritual and physical condition of his people left him in the same state we get to when we lose someone close to us.

It's very clear that Nehemiah has a burden in his heart for people. Nehemiah has a burden in his heart for the ability of people to worship in the temple as God has instructed. Nehemiah has a burden in his heart for the glory of God and for the name of God to be made great among the nations. That gets clearer and clearer as we read into chapters 2, 3, and 4.

There's an old worship song from Casting Crowns. If you remember that band, they're great guys with great lyrics. They had a song with a line that said, "God, break our hearts for what breaks Yours."

Think about that: "God, break our hearts for what breaks Yours." Meaning, "God, help us care about what You care about. God, help us feel what You feel as You look at the people around us."

Robin Guest - we talked about him last Sunday as we did a little church history session on Champion Forest -

wasn't from this area. He was from Navasota. He came down, saw the growth in this area and the need for churches proclaiming the name of Jesus in this area, and his heart broke for the people here, just as God's heart broke for the people here. He planted a church, and Champion Forest was the church.

Some of you were part of the original North Klein campus as it launched. It was the same thing. You had a burden for the growth in this area. That burden led to prayer, which led to action, which led to where we're sitting right here, right now.

One of my favorite professors in seminary is a guy named Dr. Jim Hamilton. He had this to say about Nehemiah's heartbreak here. He writes a lot about Nehemiah chapter 1. He says, "If we love God and the advance of His glory, we will feel deep sorrow when the advance of the gospel is halted, and we will be disciplined and diligent to fast and pray."

That's where Nehemiah is. He's facing a crisis moment in his life. As we continue to read, here's what we're going to learn about him: He is a very capable man. He is a very strong leader. He's a man of influence, connections, means, and resources. We're going to see that he is a brave warrior. All of that. The guy has no fear.

But, like we said at the beginning, he doesn't immediately jump into action. He doesn't run to Jerusalem to solve everybody's problems. What does he do? He gets on his knees in a posture of prayer. He turns his face to the Lord.

To be very clear, for every believer, prayer is the foundation that our plans are built on. Prayer is the foundation that we build everything else on.

Let this sink in, and let's go slowly here. A lot of us operate out of order. The biblical pattern is pray, then plan. The biblical pattern is pray, and then act.

Too often, we jump into action. We start moving and going, and then we say, "God, I'm doing this. Why don't You come along and join me?"

Sometimes we plan. We write it all out. We lift up these grand plans, hold them up to God, and say, "God, give us success in this," before we've prayed and asked God what success would even look like.

It's a pattern in the Bible: prayer first. The order matters.

I remember when I went to middle school. I was really excited to jump from fifth grade into sixth grade. There were a lot of reasons why, and oddly enough, thinking back to it, one of the main reasons was that I was excited to get a locker. I wanted to be able to put my stuff in there. Maybe I watched **Saved by the Bell** when I was a kid and saw the lockers and stuff. I don't know, but I was excited to get a locker.

They don't give kids lockers anymore. My kids carry around 50-pound backpacks. It drives me nuts.

Anyway, I was excited to get a locker. I memorized my combination. I didn't want to be the kid who forgot the combination. The numbers were 23-10-17. Isn't it funny how your mind works? I remember my sixth-grade locker combination: 23-10-17. If you're ever trying to hack my stuff, I don't use that password anymore.

I couldn't get it open before the first class on the first day. I'm sitting there, sort of frustrated, and somebody looks at me and says, "You need some help?"

I'm like, "I guess."

This older kid tries to help me. He's like, "What's your combination?"

I held out the card. He looked at the numbers, put them in, popped the lock, and opened it up.

I said, "How did you do that? How did you know what number to put first?"

He said, "They're written in order."

I'm like, "What?"

He goes, "They're written in order."

I was trying all different combinations. I didn't just put them in order. The order absolutely matters.

As we turn to God's Word, we see an order of things, and it is always, always prayer first.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Look at Nehemiah's prayer starting in verse 5. Actually, before we look at Nehemiah's prayer, let me give you a statement. Hold on to this: Correct theology inspires bold prayer.

That means a proper review of who God is, what God has done, what God has said, and what God has promised inspires bold prayer.

Nehemiah knew the truth about God. He knew what God had said. He knew what God had promised. He knew what God had done, and that inspired him to pray boldly before our heavenly Father. Look, starting in verse 5, Nehemiah prays:

O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants,

confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,

but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven,

from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there."

They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name,

and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

- Nehemiah 1:5-11a

This wasn't a passing moment of prayer. "I pray before You day and night." He is in a posture of prayer before the Lord for the people of Israel, God's servants.

Look at Nehemiah's prayer. What did it include?

Worship, because he knew who God was. Great God. Awesome God. Promise-keeping, covenant-keeping God.

Confession. "God, we know we've sinned before You. Our ancestors have sinned. My father's house has sinned. I have sinned."

Then there's belief in the promises of God. Look at verse 8: "You promised, God, that if we did this, You'd scatter us, and it's happened." Look at verse 9: "God, You also promised that if we turned back to You, You would bring us back to the Promised Land to make Your name dwell there."

Nehemiah knew the promises of God. He's essentially quoting Deuteronomy 4:26-31. He knew what God had said, and he didn't believe just a little bit of it. Nehemiah believed all of it.

He believed that their sin had scattered them. He believed that God had promised to bring them back and redeem them. He believed God to be true to His Word.

That belief in who God is and what God said - correct theology - drove him to pray with a holy boldness. In verses 10 and 11, he says, "God, they're Your people. Do what You said You were going to do. Redeem them and give them success."

He's praying the Bible. He's praying the promises of God that we read in Deuteronomy and again in Leviticus. He's praying the promises of God that we read in Isaiah, with the second half of the book talking about this restoration from exile.

He's praying with language from the Bible. Look at how it ends: "Grant success. Give us success." Do you know where that comes from? Psalm 1. It's the same phrasing we see in Psalm 1, where it talks about how those who prosper are the ones who meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. They're the ones who are going to prosper in all they do. That language of prospering and granting success is the same thing.

Nehemiah is praying Scripture back to the Lord.

I don't want you to miss this: He knew what to pray because he knew the Bible. He knew what to pray because he knew what God had already said.

This is just another call, another reminder, of how important it is for me and for you to read our Bibles consistently, knowing what God has said.

Think about what he's done so far. He's taken no action. There's no game plan in place here. He faces a moment - a big moment in his life and in the life of his people - and he meets the moment with intentional prayer.

You're going to face a lot of moments in your life. You already have, and there are more coming. Meet those moments with intentional prayer.

Pray for a Burden

That's our application. I gave it to you up front. Let me flesh it out just a little bit more. There are two steps to this that I want to point out this morning.

The first is this: As we meet the moment with intentional prayer, I want to encourage you to pray that God would give you a burden. Pray that God would give you a burden.

Nehemiah wept and mourned. He really did care. His heart was broken, not over the physical condition of the city of Jerusalem. His heart broke over the spiritual condition of the people. His heart broke because they faced great trouble and great shame. His heart broke because the name of God and the glory of God weren't being lifted up and proclaimed among the nations from Jerusalem.

Again, as we read the book, we're going to see that more and more.

As we think about this burden in our hearts, let me ask you: Like Nehemiah, are you broken for people whose lives are in ruin? Are you broken for people you know who are walking through great trouble and great shame? Are you broken for people who have been deceived by the enemy and are living in sin?

Are you broken for people you know whose marriages are struggling or maybe even crumbling right now? Does it bother you at all? Does something stir inside you? Does it break your heart to hear about needs in our community? Does anything happen in your heart when you hear of people you know and love who are walking with hardness in their hearts toward the Word and the will of God?

Pray this morning that God would give you a heart like He has for people who are made in His image. Ask God to put a burden on your heart.

We're going to see that Nehemiah works on projects. He does. But at the end of the day, all of these are about the glory of God and the spiritual condition of people.

Our church is going into a season of projects. No doubt. We've talked about them. You've seen them. You got a book about them. There's a website and videos and all that. But I want to make sure our hearts and our eyes are in the right place. Everything we believe God is calling us to do is about the glory of God and the spiritual

condition of people.

Pray that God would move your hearts for those who live in Magnolia. Pray that God would stir your heart for the unreached people of Nepal. Pray that God would stir your hearts for a post-Christian Europe that needs local church families like this bringing the gospel back into it.

Pray that God would put a burden on your heart. Pray that He'd cause you to care deeply for your friends or family members who don't know Jesus and for those who are walking with hardened hearts today.

Wherever the gospel isn't moving forward - your neighborhood, your workplace, the friend group you belong to - pray that God would put it in your heart to care. Pray that you would have a holy burden.

As God grows our hearts for others, it's going to lead to prayers like Nehemiah prayed.

Pray With Holy Boldness

That's our second step this morning. When you pray before God, pray with a holy boldness.

It's a reminder of what we said earlier: Correct theology inspires bold prayer.

As we read our Bibles, we can know the heart of God. We can know the will of God. We can know the promises of God. Romans 12:2 tells us that as our minds are transformed by the Word of God, we can know God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

When we know God's Word, when we know God's character, and when we know God's will, it causes us to pray differently. We begin to pray with this holy boldness, with this holy ambition for the promises of God to come about.

Nehemiah knew what God had promised. He knew God had promised restoration. He knew God had promised redemption. He knew that God promised that the name of God would be made great again from the city of Jerusalem. He knew about a return to the Promised Land and the glory of God.

He knew all of that because he knew the Word of God. He knew the promises of Deuteronomy and Leviticus and Isaiah. So when he prayed, there was no wonder. There was no question in his voice. There was a bold request for God to be at work and for God to keep His Word.

Look at verse 9: "God, gather Your people up. You promised You would."

Look at verse 10: "God, they're Your people. They were Your people then. They're Your people now. You made that promise to us."

Verse 11: "God, give us success because You've already promised that this was going to happen."

Nehemiah grabbed hold of the promises of God. He knew the Word of God. Because he was able to grab hold of these promises, it led to a bold prayer life.

Let's pray like that. Begin to pray with a holy boldness.

Think about the promises God has made you. We don't have time to go through all of them, but let me give you three. We do this from time to time because I think it's important to remember that God has made promises to His children.

In Matthew 28, God promises never, ever to leave you. He says:

I am with you always, to the end of the age.

— Matthew 28:20

When you pray before the Lord, you can pray with a holy boldness, knowing that God is with you.

In Romans chapter 8, we see that God has promised that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. When you pray, you can pray with a holy boldness, knowing that there is a God in heaven who loves you and is for you.

What about Philippians chapter 4? God has promised to guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus and to give you a peace that passes all understanding. No matter how unpeaceful your life or our world may get, He has promised peace in your mind and peace in your heart.

You can go before Him no matter what you face and no matter what you're walking through, praying, asking, and claiming that peace of God in your life. You can do it with a holy boldness because you know what God has already promised.

When you go before God, guess what? Because of Jesus, you go before God as His child, as part of the family of God, knowing that you have a heavenly Father who loves you and desires to give you all things.

Prayer is the foundation of everything. As you walk through life, meet the moment with intentional prayer. The moment in your marriage, the moment in your family, the moment in your health, the moment in your finances - meet the moment with intentional prayer.

As a church family, we're going to step into a season of "Next." It's the same thing. Let's meet this moment with intentional prayer and know that prayer leads to action.

We're going to see it in Nehemiah. There's a time to act. Nehemiah acts. God uses him to do great things. He just does it in the right order: prayer first.

Invitation and Prayer

Would you pray with me now?

With our heads bowed, as we enter into a season of prayer this morning, here's what I want to encourage you to do. You're facing a moment in your life right now. Maybe it's a big one, maybe it's a little one, or maybe there are multiple moments. You're facing a moment in your life. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Meet that moment this morning in prayer.

Maybe you need God's wisdom. Maybe you need to ask God to remind you of His promises to you this

morning. Maybe you need clarity. Maybe you need grace. Maybe you need favor. Maybe you need forgiveness. Maybe you need boldness. Whatever it is, meet this moment with prayer.

Maybe you've already started down the road. Maybe you've got things out of order this morning. Circle back. Say, "God, I want to meet the moment with prayer. Lead me. Guide me. Give me Your wisdom again, which You promised. Give me Your wisdom. Help me to know what's next."

In just a minute, we're going to sing one more song. We're going to stand up, and we'll have some pastors and prayer partners down here at the front. If you're facing a moment right now, it's overwhelming you, and you just want somebody to pray alongside you, we're going to have pastors and prayer partners down here. We'd be honored to pray with you and pray over you as you meet that moment with prayer this morning.

Maybe you're thinking, "I'm not sure I can stand before the Lord with boldness and confidence. You just said that a lot of people in here can do that because, through Jesus, they're children of God. They can stand knowing that God in heaven is their Father."

Listen, if you're here today and you've never trusted Christ as your Savior, I want to encourage you to start there. That is your next step. Take the first step. Trust Jesus as Lord.

If you're ready to do that this morning, come down and tell one of our pastors or prayer partners that you're ready to trust Christ as Savior.

Whatever moment is next for you, meet that moment with prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You invite us into that conversation, into that relationship with You. God, we thank You for the pattern we have in Your Word. That pattern, Lord, shows us it's not about us. It's about You. That pattern shows us it's not our strength. God, it's Your strength. That pattern shows us it's not our plan. God, it's Your plan.

God, we thank You. We trust You for that. Help us meet the moments of our lives with prayer. God, put a burden on our hearts for people. When we pray, help us pray boldly, knowing who You are and what You have already done.

It's in the name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.